

## **Esther Fuchs, *Feminist Theory and the Bible: Interrogating the Sources*.**

### **Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts. London: Lexington Books, 2016**

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In the volume's introduction, Fuchs takes us on a whistle stop tour of contemporary feminist thinking, including a brief introduction to Anglo and French feminisms, empiricist feminism, the "standpoint approach" (perhaps most notably used in the field of biblical studies by Scholz 2000), postmodern feminism, second-wave feminism, and poststructuralist feminism. Fuchs provides a thorough but remarkably succinct description of the above approaches to feminist critical endeavour whilst exposing the origins, values, and limitations of each. This chapter alone would prove an exceptionally useful resource for anyone engaging for the first time with feminist biblical studies, or feminist studies more broadly.

In the first chapter, Fuchs outlines her goals for the volume which include addressing a gap in feminist biblical research by attempting to "map out" a history of feminist thinking around the Hebrew Bible, including feminist scholars' various approaches and their epistemological worth (13). To this end, she sorts previous works into three categories: gynocritic, pluralist and feminist. Fuchs describes gynocriticism as an approach which sees androcentrism as a symptom of contemporary readings, and instead, focuses on "female agency, its antecedents and superiority" in biblical cultures (14). Phyllis Trible, Carol Meyers, Ilana Pardes, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky are cited within this category (15). Pluralism, however, is a largely reconstructive approach which recognises the presence and power of both men and women and "emphasizes that the biblical text is in the eye of the beholders ... open to any and all interpretations and perspectives" (15). Fuchs identifies Mieke Bal, Phyllis Bird, and Athalya Brenner as pluralist practitioners. Finally, feminist criticism is defined as an approach which recognizes the uncompromisingly androcentric perspectives and priorities of biblical texts. The presence of women in these texts should not signal inclusivity, but should be simply seen as the "products of a male imagination" (16). Fuchs describes this approach as methodologically *critical* as it constantly examines patriarchal assumptions and goals, and recognizes the Bible as central to the creation of these values, rather than just a symptom of them. Fuchs places herself, Cheryl Exum, and Claudia Camp in the category of the feminist critic. These well thought-out categories provide readers with an excellent framework for understanding how we can approach feminist critical readings of biblical texts beyond a position of identification and reconstruction (i.e. the gynocritical and pluralistic) and, instead, try to understand further how these texts create and reproduce patriarchal ideals.

In the second chapter, entitled "Biblical Feminisms," Fuchs goes deeper into the political differences of feminist interpretation and stresses the value of acknowledging differences in method. She gives particular attention to Mieke Bal's interdisciplinary theoretical approach and, by contrast, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

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who seeks to create clear guidelines for feminist biblical studies specifically. The key difference, Fuchs states, is that Bal sees the biblical text in “linguistic and semiotic terms, as a foundation of Western culture” and Fiorenza in “historical and theological terms, as a foundation of Christianity” (32). This sets the stage for the rest of the chapter which explores what Fuchs understands as a divide between theological and academic feminisms.

Perhaps the most useful part of this chapter is when Fuchs dives deep into an exploration of theoretical developments in her own work, in this case her work on Ruth as a biblical heroine. Not only is this an engaging practice in self-reflection, it gives the reader an opportunity to really get to grips with what the development and application of Fuch’s deconstructive feminist critical approach really looks like in practice. This is something we see more of in chapters four, five, and six.

In chapter three, “The Neoliberal Turn in Feminist Biblical Studies”, Fuchs provides a more focussed critique of the gynocritic approach, with particular attention paid to Ilana Pardes, Susan Ackerman, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky. Here, she argues that gynocritics offer ultimately essentialist readings of women which rely on a universalizing of women’s “experience” or “womanness” (55). Then, Fuchs stresses, there is a failure to separate knowledge from power; in doing so, any attempt to get at the “real experiences” of biblical women are compromised as their language in the text is still part of patriarchal discourse, and not an “island of innocent expression” isolated from such influences (57). Fuchs goes on to critique gynocritical quests for “heterogeneous types” (60) and, finally, their quest for “powerful women,” which she argues does little to question or trouble the ultimately patriarchal values of the Bible. As Fuchs describes the gynocritical construction of equity between genders, she makes one of her few nods to postfeminist interpretations of biblical texts. Fuchs is right to talk about the dangers of universalizing gendered experiences and making the focus of these conversations on “sexual difference rather than power” (57); however, it is here that more of a discussion on queer theory would have been useful, particularly the work of scholars such as Deryn Guest (2012).

In chapter four, Fuchs offers a close reading of the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. Fuchs’s primary argument is that feminist biblical scholars such as Trible, Exum, and Bal have been too quick to isolate narratives concerning the violent victimization of women to the private sphere, arguing that they can also sit in the framework of a national narrative (72). Jephthah’s daughter, through her position as the sacrificial virgin, is a symbol of “national difference” to a foreign and violent Other (a mantle taken, Fuchs argues, by women like Delilah), and it is her suffering and victimization that constructs her identity as an Israelite (86). Fuchs insightfully argues that, through a postcolonial feminist critical exploration of this text, Jephthah’s violent behaviour and his daughter’s (arguably) passive response is reframed, and an ideological function that has previously been obscured can be disclosed: the construction of a “national body politic” through the suffering of Israelite daughters (80).

In the next two chapters, Fuchs continues to provide readings using her own feminist critical reading strategy. In chapter five, she uses a postcolonial approach with a focus on “pedagogical narrative” to provide an intertextual analysis of women *in* the prophet texts and women *as* prophets, suggesting that they are subject

to both gendered and national script (111). Chapter six focuses on the relationship between intermarriage, gender, and nation in the Hebrew Bible. As opposed to scholars such as Claudia Camp and Kwok Pui-lan who suggest that foreign women are subject to “double oppression ... as sexual and national other” (116), Fuchs suggests that such analysis serves unhelpfully to polarize the Israelite woman as either oppressor or victim (116). Instead, Fuchs argues for an “intertextual, relational, and transnational” analysis to suggest that to contextualise Israelite women in these binary terms serves to undermine their nuanced position in the national narrative as both inside *and* outside the nation (130). Although Fuchs is quick to concede that those who are oppressed can also be oppressors, this discussion could have been supplemented by the use of more scholarship from people such as Sarah Ahmed, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde on intersectional feminism and how this relates the phenomenon of misogynoir and “white feminism.”

A great deal of ground is covered in relatively few pages (the whole volume is 150 pages with index and bibliography) making it a very accessible book to read. Of course, the succinctness of the volumes means there is some ground that is given less attention than readers may like. For example, I would have liked to have seen more in-depth consideration of how some of Fuchs’s discussions (as highlighted throughout this review) can be understood alongside postfeminist interpretation, as well as queer and intersectional feminisms.

I am, however, very grateful for this volume, particularly Fuchs’s nuance of thought and ability to provide such in-depth yet succinct descriptions and explorations of what is still a vast breadth of feminist biblical scholarship. Fuchs’ highly recognized and demonstrable expertise as a pioneer in feminist biblical studies means this will have universal appeal for people engaging with feminist exploration of the Hebrew Bible for the first time, as well as for experts in the field. This text will be exceptionally helpful for my own research, and has left a lasting impression on me in terms of what it means to undertake a *feminist* critical study of a text—as opposed to a “feminine” (or gynocritical) one. In practice, this means moving past a position of recognition or mourning of women characters in the Hebrew Bible (something which Rhiannon Graybill has spoken about in her work on consent discourses), and, instead, never ceasing to ask those difficult, probing questions to get to the heart of how biblical narratives consistently serve the values of a patriarchy.

## Reference List

- Guest, Deryn, 2012. *Beyond Feminist Studies*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Scholz, Susanne. *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34*. Studies in Biblical Literature. New York: Peter Lang.



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